

The Emergence of a Ruling Order: English Landed Society 1650-1750

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James M. Rosenheim is the author of *The Townshends of Raynham* (1989) and a number of other studies of landownership and county government, with particular reference to the county of Norfolk. In this new book he draws on a wide variety of printed primary and secondary sources in the hundred years after 1650. His thesis is that from a situation of division and uncertainty which prevailed in the second half of the seventeenth century, the landowners emerged by 1750 as a unified elite, confident in their position as a body of "natural rulers".

The middle seventeenth-century hostilities and doubts which weakened landowners as a ruling order sprang from a variety of political, religious, and economic influences: the civil wars and leveling threats of the 1640s and 1650s; the deeply-felt doctrinal differences which set owner against owner and split families in two; and the problems which beset the country's economy, most notably the fall in agricultural prices and rents. Added to these were the more slowly developing causes of concern: a demographic crisis which appeared to put the very survival of the élite at risk from a failure of male heirs; and social changes which threatened to undermine stability - such, for example, as manifestations of disrespect among the lower orders, and even the growth of tea-drinking, which some held responsible for such untoward developments as a supposed decline in female beauty and the rather more certain agricultural depression of the 1730s and 1740s.

The regaining of political control and the renewed social dominance of the superior landowners resulted from a discarding, or modification, of old views and practices, and also from a grasping of the opportunities

for profit and patronage offered by the political and constitutional changes which followed the accession of William and Mary. The élite moved away from excessive partisanship in politics as well as towards a more relaxed view of religious doctrines. The more influential landowners took advantages of their domination of a Parliament which had gained extended powers, and they seized, and sought to retain, the advantages to be derived from supporting the Hanoverian monarchy; witness the guarded response of English men of influence to the 'Fifteen and the 'Forty-five.

They also adopted a more detached view of their role in local and provincial affairs and became more cosmopolitan in their life-style, traveling more, and becoming increasingly taken up by life in towns, and particularly that in London. They continued, moreover, to withdraw from active estate management, leasing out their farms to large tenants whose tenancies were regulated by specially-appointed land stewards. Some owners, however, assumed responsibility for encouraging agricultural improvement and were influential advocates of new crops and novel practices. An old and continuing influence which served to characterise the landed élite was the sharing of a common classical education, the grand tour, and a common life-style which, when not diverted towards urban, and particularly London, diversions, revolved round country houses, country sports, entertaining and being entertained. Often the differences in wealth and in life-style were emphasised by a growing physical separation, evidenced by the building of grander houses, isolated from the lesser country people by their exclusiveness as well as by great stretches of parkland.

In general, this argument, and its supporting evidence will not appear novel to well-informed readers. Taken separately, the changes and characteristics that are elaborated in the book are familiar; it is the bringing of them together in a comprehensive, connected argument which is illuminating, shedding new light on the age as a whole.

There are, however, a number of comments to be made. First, the argument is most valid when limited to the landed élite. The author is necessarily concerned with the greater landowners (including the greater gentry). Necessarily, because it is their records which have most frequently survived and in sufficient quantity and quality for historians to have studied them. The minor squires, professor Rosenheim states, are discussed in his book less than the greater gentry and nobles, 'largely because the former had a smaller part in ruling, and more significantly, in defining what rule meant and what a ruler was over the course of the period' (p. 5). Included in his argument, nevertheless, are those lesser squires who were Justices, or who managed to send a son on a tour of Europe, or who were sufficiently enterprising to find marriage partners for their offspring from among the prospects available in London or Bath. And even the squires of more limited ambition or fewer contacts, he considers, were likely to be touched nevertheless by metropolitan influences.

This said, the discussion does concentrate, however, on the superior elements of the landowning class, and the reader may feel that the minor squire is neglected. There is also throughout the book a failure to recognise that the argument has geographical limitations - that it is considerably invalidated in some quite extensive regions by the nature of the landed society to be found there. In remote and isolated districts, such as large areas of Wales and parts of northern and south-western England, marked differences existed between the local squires and the bulk of English landowners. The persistence of regional differences was largely due to physical factors, especially primitive roads which made distance a discouraging and costly obstacle, an obstacle which prevailed even in parts of the home counties in winter-time. Such areas often exhibited differences, too)in wealth, with even the best families subsisting on incomes which would not have supported the most modest country gentlemen elsewhere. A low level of wealth (by national standards) led of course -to differences in the way of life and in the scale of country residences, while remoteness from a broader culture fostered an enthusiasm for regional interests, as in the Welsh squires' support of Welsh-speaking poets and bards.

There were of course, some important differences, if less marked ones, in the ranks of those who made up the main body of the English gentry. While recognising that they had interests in common with the greater landowners, the minor English gentry and country gentlemen perforce lived in a different way, and their perennial concerns were much more local in character. For many of these even a visit to the county town was a rare event, especially where a journey of as much as fifty miles was involved. A stay in London was

such a rarity as to have the power of furnishing conversation for many years after. It is true, as Professor Rosenheim argues, that regular participation in the London season came to form a link between members of the landed class, but this is true only of the wealthier ones. In practice it was a factor dividing the wealthy élite from those numerous lesser owners who could not afford it, or who could afford it only occasionally. Indeed, even in 1750, at the end of the author's period, landed society was more diverse and divided - by geographical situation income and life-style - than he appears to accept. And with the rise in aristocratic wealth, made evident by great new country houses and extensive parks, as well as by the London season, the gap between greater owners and lesser was made even wider. Differences in culture, again, were created by the grand tour. Experience of foreign travel no doubt helped to provide a common background for those fortunate enough to enjoy it. But again it was often confined in practice to the eldest son only, and less wealthy owners could afford a mere truncated version for their eldest sons, while the generality of owners could not afford it at all.

The author argues not only for the influence of London in creating a national identity among the élite, but also for town life generally as reducing the old identity with county affairs. One may have reservations about this when the argument is extended beyond London and the few major provincial-cities and spas Minor gentry could, and did, take advantage of little-known local spas, of which scores existed - in Lancashire even Wigan was in this age a place of resort. But many such spas and country towns had rather limited social life to offer at a time when their population was little more than that of villages today. Even some of the county towns were far from impressive: Leicester, for example, had an estimated 6,000 inhabitants in 1700, Northampton only 5,000 as late as 1750, and Defoe's 'antient, ragged, decay'd' Lincoln a mere 3,000 in 1705.

Yet another consideration is the increase in provincial towns, in some villages, and London too, of successful people from trade, industry, and the professions. True, some of the most successful of these eventually bought an estate and country house, and in time became accepted pillars of the landed community. But not all wished to do this or could afford to do it. The capital cost of acquiring sufficient land, and the low return yielded by the rents, combined to make other kinds of assets much more attractive. The larger towns, especially if they were ports or centers of industry and trade had always been dominated by merchants and manufacturers, some of them men of great wealth. The incomes of urban grandees, indeed, could rival those of all but the greatest landed magnates, and in their own environment they were persons of consequence. Towns which were increasingly dominated by merchants, manufacturers, craftsmen, and tradesmen of all descriptions became more and more independent of, and alien to, country landowners. In addition to major provincial centres like Bristol, Liverpool, Hull, Leeds and Birmingham, the centres of the cloth and iron districts and even the smaller country towns of the home counties were subject to similar developments. By 1750 when as Rosenheim declares, the landed elite had regained the role of natural rulers, its hegemony was already under challenge from powerful mercantile and industrial interests. And in less than a century the first reform of Parliament, modest and conservative as it was, began the process by which the rulers of 1750 were to be swiftly superseded.

In their landowning functions the changes in train among the in 1650-1750 were limited and far from complete. It may have been the objective of many owners to convert lands held on ancient, outmoded forms of tenure into rack-rented estates, but the obstacles to be overcome were substantial. The average duration of a lease for lives may have been only some twenty years, but landlords who began a policy of refusing to enter new lives faced a lengthy period of diminished income as the periodical receipts of fines were foregone. Also involved might be a certain loss of local popularity and political support. At all events, lands let on leases for lives and on copyhold tenure were still common in some parts of the country for many years after 1750.

Even if it were fortunate to possess no such lands, the typical large estate, built up through marriage and inheritance, was scattered geographically and consequently was difficult and costly to manage. When the landlord employed no steward, the work involved in looking after diverse and perhaps distant enterprises was substantial. For instance, the first Lord Ashburnham (born in 1656) possessed a variety of enterprises in Sussex as well as in Bedfordshire and Wales, but the press of business was so great that he could rarely find the time to visit his Welsh lands and coal mine. Subsequently, a succession of handsomely-dowried bride

brought more lands into the hands of Ashburnham's heirs, adding property in Suffolk, Dorset, Lancashire and elsewhere to the original nucleus. With such a degree of scattering and diversity the problems of management were so great that the appointment of a land steward, supervising a number of local rent collectors, was the only answer for an owner who valued his leisure and respected his social and political responsibilities. But the creation of a management structure neither guaranteed the maximizing of income nor obviated the risk of fraud, particularly where the estates were so highly scattered that even a conscientious steward could not visit every property at all regularly. Indeed, although the large estates of the elite formed the basis of an impressive income and of political and social eminence they were far from being always efficient economic entities.

As improvers, some owners (such as the first Lord Ashburnham) did take an interest in new crops, improved farming techniques, and the development of mines, timber resources, and other enterprises on their estates. But the work of improvement was expensive, slow, and uncertain, and numbers of large owners showed little interest in it. Many of the agricultural innovations of the period, as Joan Thirsk has shown recently in her *Alternative Agriculture* (1997), were in fact undertaken by merchants, industrialists, farmers and other enterprising individuals, as well as by landed gentlemen. And, of course, there were failures as well as successes, and in 1750 a great deal still had to be done to modernise the structure as well as the output of English farming.

Professor Rosenheim does not attempt to calculate the numbers of landowners who made up his ruling elite of 1750, nor the extent of their landed property, and indeed such calculations are beset by a host of difficulties and are bound to be imprecise. But it seems likely that the owners who made up his ruling élite controlled less than a half of the country's agricultural land, perhaps considerably less than a half. Their governing role, in fact, was dependent on the acquiescence of the various elements which made up the governed: lesser landowners who largely dominated many individual parishes the large body of independent farmers and tenant-farmers who together with leading tradesmen and craftsmen and the parish clergy, worked the machinery of local government; the merchants, manufacturers, tradesmen and others who were the ruling force in many country parishes as well as in towns; and the bulk of disregarded labourers rural and urban. It is this acquiescence which perhaps is more in need of explanation than that resurgence of the landed élite which forms the core of this book. Acceptance of the ordered society headed by landowners, under attack at the beginning of the book's period, was again under attack less than fifty years after the end of that hundred years. Professor Rosenheim has given us part of the story here but not, it seems, the whole story. The nation which the landed élite ruled was not divided simply into rural and urban: there were important commercial and industrial enterprises in the countryside, just as landowners owned valuable property in towns. The structure of the national society was undoubtedly more complex than might be supposed from the argument here.

It may well be that the acquiescence of the nation in the rule of a landed élite was in some part due to the intermeshing of economic and social interests, as when country squires risked funds in mills mines. shipping and other industrial and commercial ventures, and landowners in search of a handsome dowry sought brides among the daughters of merchants and industrialists - and of course when men of new wealth looked to acquire country houses and estates.

These are only some of the reflections about the nature of the England of 1650 and 1750 which are stimulated by this most interesting volume Its admirable scholarship, its wide range of materials, and the importance of its argument make it a book to be read, and read again

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